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"In Another Country": Three as Symbol

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"IN ANOTHER COUNTRY": *THREE* AS SYMBOL

by Rosemary Stephens

Ernest Hemingway makes a deliberate use of the number *three* in his short story "In Another Country" to such a degree that the reader cannot ignore its symbolical implication.

In commenting upon the title, Carlos Baker has written, "The country is Italy; but it is also another country still, a country (it is just possible) where a man can find things he cannot lose."[1] A similar but a more extensive interpretation may be made by the reader whom the title reminds of Christopher Marlowe's Jew. Murder, covetousness, and illicit love are three crimes committed by Barabas, the unbeliever of *The Jew of Malta*: to the friars, he admits that he is guilty of the murder of his own daughter, of greed and usury, and of "Fornication—but that was in another country; and besides, the wench is dead" (IV, i, 43-44). Hemingway's story treats of the same triumvirate in different terms: death, society, and sex—or love. Themes of "In Another Country" concern the loss through death of all one loves, and the need of courage for tests in war and away from the battlefield; the attempt of an individual to adjust to society, and the acceptance or isolation which results; the effort to find a form of love through experiences shared by comrades or, in this instance, by café girls in Milan.

The narrator, a lonely soldier, finds it "pleasant along the streets looking in the windows."[2] Three animals are mentioned in the cold outside the shops: foxes, deer, and birds. The hero must choose

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[1]Carlos Baker, *Hemingway: The Writer as Artist* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 137.

[2]Ernest Hemingway, "In Another Country," *Men Without Women* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1927), p. 58. Hereafter, page numbers are given in parentheses and refer to this edition.

one of three bridges every afternoon to reach the hospital where he is treated for his wounded knee. On one of the three bridges a woman sells roasted chestnuts, and this is the bridge he selects, for, as he later recalls, "It was warm standing in front of her charcoal fire, and the chestnuts were warm afterward in your pocket" (p. 58).

At the hospital, the hero makes friends with three soldiers who had earlier selected the professions of lawyer, painter, and soldier. The soldier-patients walk to the Café Cova, not by the two long routes alongside the canal, but by the third route, a short one, through the communist quarter. The youth who wanted to be a lawyer has three medals, proof that he has lived a long time with death. Sometimes another young man—whose nose has been shot off—joins the group in the walk through the crowded section, where "we felt held together by there being something that had happened that they, the people who disliked us, did not understand" (p. 62). The friendship between the hero and the three medal-winners diminishes because they are like three hawks, whereas the hero is not a hawk. Neither is the boy whose face has been rebuilt, and he and the narrator remain friends.

Another friend of the hero is the major, Signor Maggiore, the greatest fencer in Italy before the war, whose hand is now like a baby's. The major does not believe in bravery; he does not believe in the machines used for treatment of wounded soldiers; he does not believe in a man's placing himself in a position to lose that which he loves. A man "should find things he cannot lose" (p. 66). The major loses his wife, and—not being brave—he cries, even as he proves his bravery, carrying himself straight and soldierly, seeking the courage to live. For three days the major absents himself from the hospital: then he returns, dutifully undergoing treatment, indifferent to the doctor, the staff, the machines. He wears a black band on his sleeve, stares out of the window, and ignores three photographs of hands restored by the machines in which he has no faith.

The main theme of the story is found often in Hemingway's works: the realization by the young hero that loss must come to everyone—sometimes by means of war, sometimes by an inexplicable

fate—and that one must find a courage at moments of crisis to enable him to continue to live after loss has occurred. Life treats Hemingway's heroes badly, making them lose what they have held dear, but they abide by a tripartite code which demands adherence to: (1) duty, acting in life as if fate will not play tricks upon them; (2) courage, facing the test which often comes unexpectedly or, seemingly, too late; (3) stoicism, refraining from an effusive sharing, since man is alone and must not speak indiscriminately of his troubles. Comfort, when it occurs, comes only through a comprehension which is beyond mere words.

Death appears in war, in mutilation, and in fatal illness. The placement of the three animals at the beginning of the story is purposeful, for they convey the idea of coldness, danger, and death. They also indicate the different natures of man. Some men, like foxes, are predatory, living in a natural but prejudiced isolation, filled with hatred. Other men, like deer, live in an isolation harmless to others, an easy prey to destructive forces they cannot understand. Most men, like birds, have natures with varying degrees of isolation and adjustment: in time of war, the most predatory men are able to win society's approbation.

The qualities generally attributed to these three animals are revealed in the characters of this story as they react to death, to society, and to each other.

The three young hunting-hawks personify murder—an asset in war—with medals to show society's approval of their courageous deeds. Their chosen professions relate to Barabas' crimes. The lawyer illustrates the necessity to engage not in usury but in affairs of the world of which usury is often a part. The painter reflects the loves of mankind, elicits a response within man's inner nature, and fills emotional needs, sometimes prostituting his art for fame and money. The soldier evidences the continual need to cause the death of designated foes. Of the three men, the one who wished to be a lawyer is the one who has the three medals, for it is the person who can easily adjust to the current requirements of this world who is rewarded by society in proportion to that adjustment.

Concern for—and the necessity of—money is reflected in the presence of the woman on the bridge, who sells both chestnuts and

warmth; of the unnamed café girls, whom the hero finds "very patriotic" (p. 62) in patronage; and of the antagonistic person in a wineshop, a member of the resentful communistic crowd, quick to condemn because of a sense of deprivation. These three reflect an emotional involvement with the narrator.

The unemotional world is indicated by the machine of war, which is ever-present; by the doctor, whose patent optimism and clinical interest illustrate the aloof concern of institutions devoted to the rehabilitation of injured man; and by the major's wife, who is not seen, but who symbolizes in death the cruelty of fate and the futility of attempts to anticipate the future. Joseph De Falco believes the machine to be the controlling image in this story; the machines, he writes, "become synonymous with hope, healing, and even a kind of divinity" and the doctor, therefore, is a healing priest who "has faith in the machines."[3] It is unnecessary to assume that because the doctor mouths a banal optimism, he has faith in anything. The doctor is almost a machine himself, in this story, and the machines do not represent divinity, or even hope. The machines are an embodiment of humanitarianism: they represent the efforts of man—not of some divinity—to right the wrongs which man has caused, to rehabilitate soldiers injured in war so that they may resume useful places in society and, incidentally, regain lost pleasures.

The major's disgust with the machines comes not from a confrontation with divinity, but from the knowledge that what is lost is lost forever. The major did not marry "until he was definitely invalided out of the war" (p. 62), in an attempt to prevent a loss to his wife; then, having married, he lost his wife to pneumonia and found himself a stunned widower. "No one expected her to die" (p. 67). Man, through the machines, may eventually restore the shape of the major's hand, but man cannot restore the spirit which once enabled him to use that hand to become a famous fencer, any more than man can bring back to this world the wife who is dead.

De Falco believes that the narrator gains insight when, seeing the major's despair, he realizes how absurd it is to believe in the

[3]Joseph De Falco, *The Hero in Hemingway's Short Stories* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1963), p. 132.

machines.[4] Nowhere in this story does the narrator indicate that he has come to believe the machines to be absurd. Rather, he indicates that the period of disbelief was in the past. "There was a time," he says, "when none of us believed in the machines . . . . The machines were new then" (p. 65). The period of disbelief occurred before the death of the major's wife, not afterward. If the major's despair caused a change in the narrator regarding the machines, this change would have to be one to belief. The narrator may be playing football at the very time he is telling the story, for all the reader knows.

Any definition of insight must take into account the final act of the major: after three days in which the major endures the hell of loss, finally burying his outward grief with his dead wife, he emerges stoically calm and determined dutifully to face life. This duty requires his return to the machines. At first unable to resign himself to his wife's death, the major finds in following the conventions of society a means of resignation: the black band, the three days of mourning, the return to daily duties. He has previously proved his ability to submit to regimentation: witness his reputation as a great fencer, his military rank, and his grammatical studies with the hero while coming regularly to a treatment in which he does not have faith. The final act of the major seems to indicate a coming to terms with society: even when one does not believe in the efficacy of man, one must participate in the attempts to set things right—playing a passive part, if not an active one.

The controlling image of "In Another Country" is not the machine, but the trio of cold animals outside the shops. This image is reflected in the predatoriness of forces loose in the world, in the submissions to one's fate, and in the attempts of man to adjust to the requirements of society. It is repeated in the characters' interactions with each other.

Some characters seek adjustment through love. Love from women has three faces in this story: that of the chestnut vender, who gives pleasure almost inadvertently; that of the café girls, who represent flirtation and illicit affairs; and that of the major's wife, who gives

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[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 135-136.

love within the institution of marriage. Friendship among men—another aspect of love—is seen in the hero's relation to the young hawks, to the major, and to the noseless youth.

The hawks have proved themselves in battle, which is required by the world in wartime, and, although these three soldiers appear aloof, they are adjusted to the demands of life. Three characters who have difficulty adjusting are the major, who finds the need for courage greater after he has left the battlefield; the narrator and the boy who face is being rebuilt, both wounded before they had an opportunity to discover how brave they might have been under fire. The noseless youth goes to South America where he evidently comes to terms with the world. It is no accident that he later works in a bank.

The narrator also adjusts to life. The title of the story reflects an attainment of a certain maturity and a change of purpose. Here is an incident which took place a long time ago, he tells the reader. In another country, another time, he engaged in fornication: he had an affair with adventure—with war and its aftermath, considered illicit in times of peace—but that affair is over, dead. It has wounded him, however, leaving a lasting psychological scar.

That the experience had a profound effect upon the hero is evident in the very telling of it and in the author's use of the symbolic *three,* which infuses the story with a universal significance. The number *three* has a mythical, mystical, and magical import. To many peoples in many ages it has symbolized perfection. Hemingway uses it in this story to symbolize the absolute, the ultimate basis of existence. While it is related to the three fates of pagan religion, *three* also has Christian connotations in "In Another Country."

Hemingway's use of Christian symbolism, including the symbolic *three*— in *The Old Man and the Sea,* for example—has caused critics to note a development which reaches a climax in the story of Santiago. Philip Young observes that a reverence for life's struggle and for mankind in that novel indicates a change in Hemingway: "The knowledge that a simple man is capable of the decency, dignity, and even heroism that Santiago possesses, and

that his battle can be seen in heroic terms, is itself, technical considerations for the moment aside, perhaps the greatest victory that Hemingway has won."[5] A quarter of a century earlier, however, Hemingway's "In Another Country" foreshadowed this novel: while the narrator is the virile, honest, sensitive and nervous Hemingway hero, the major reflects in a necessarily narrow sense the author's reverence for man's struggle, for decency, dignity, and true bravery. Both the short story and the novel contain an interchange between youth and age, a situation stripped of pretense and fraught with religious intimations, and symbolism which makes use of the number *three.*

Much has been made of Hemingway's symbolism in recent years. E. M. Halliday objects to the emphasis placed upon it, particularly that in an article by Caroline Gordon,[6] and declares that Hemingway uses symbolism "with a severe restraint that in his good work always staunchly protects his realism." Hemingway is not a symbolist, Halliday declares, but "the great *realist* of twentieth-century American fiction."[7]

This is true; but Hemingway was a realist who used symbolism because he was an artist. In a story as brief as "In Another Country," repeated division into groups of three of imagery, physical properties, characters, and thematic material indicates a deliberate artistic method with regard to symbolism. This story is an excellent illustration of Hemingway's artistry and his attempt to show by the use of symbolism that although "the wench is dead," man's experience with others becomes a part of him—something he cannot lose—as he meets the crises of his life, always in loneliness.

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[5]Philip Young, *Ernest Hemingway* (University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers, I; Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1959), p. 20.

[6]Caroline Gordon, "Notes on Hemingway and Kafka," *Sewanee Review,* LVII (Spring, 1949), 214-26.

[7]E. M. Halliday, "Hemingway's Ambiguity: Symbolism and Irony," *American Literature,* XXVIII (March, 1956), 22.